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Striving Toward Equity: Alumni Launch First Alumni of Color Network at Roger Williams University

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Jeronima Nix '15, Willie Borkai '14 and Melissa Husband '00, from left to right, are leading a new alumni initiative to support alumni and students of color called the RWU Alumni of Color Network.

BRISTOL, R.I. – Sometimes the universe brings the right people together at the right time to effect powerful change.

A few weeks after participating in an intergenerational conversation on the student of color experience held last year at Roger Williams University, Melissa Husband '00 connected with Willie Borkai '14 at a professional leadership event, discovering they shared their alma mater and a desire to work together to support students of color at RWU. In recounting their experiences with each other, Husband shared that she encountered racism on a predominantly white campus as well as other barriers to success at

Roger Williams 20 years ago. While Borkai a decade later experienced a feeling of family and self-growth, he told her that he knew fellow students of color who had struggled to fit in and thrive on campus similar to Melissa's experiences.

"If there are others experiencing the same difficulties I've been through, I want to help and inspire them," Husband said. "When I met Willie, we decided right at that moment to do something."

Their idea to help their alma mater? To launch RWU's first [Alumni of Color Network](#) (AOCN), engaging alumni of color and connecting them with current students of color to provide mentorship, support, and networking opportunities. They met with President Ioannis Miaoulis and other university leaders, partnering with the Office of Alumni Relations, who threw their full backing behind their vision and helped to get the initiative off the ground.

"Sitting with Melissa and Willie, I heard the stories of students of color who have not had positive experiences on our campus. It's inspiring to see our alumni's determination to make a difference and to work with us to improve equity and inclusion at the university," said President Miaoulis. "I value their leadership and look forward to working together with them on this vital initiative to ensure that all current

and future students feel fully supported and succeed at RWU.”

Over the following months, Borkai, a second-year graduate student in a Master of Clinical Mental Health Counseling program, and Husband, the R.I. Deputy Secretary of State, led a grassroots effort to build the community, connecting with alumni of color through social media and meeting with students of color to gauge what they need to feel supported by the alumni community. During their outreach, they connected with Jeronima “Niimo” Nix ’15, College Bound Director at Breakthrough Providence, who decided to become involved at a leadership level when she learned about the AOCN’s mission to mentor students and support the university’s equity work.

“As alumni who have gone through the system ourselves, had accomplishments or hit walls, we will be able to provide that information to current students. Having this space is going to be powerful for all of us to reconnect and be able to share with students that I was there, too, and this is how I navigated some of the challenges and this is how we can help guide you through your next four years,” said Nix. “And part of this work is also helping the university understand that these are the walls we faced, so what will you do to make sure the students you have now are not hitting those same walls?”

Now with a sizable network established, the founding leaders are officially introducing the RWU Alumni of Color Network to the greater alumni community this fall. Borkai and Nix are serving as co-chairs and Husband as alumni advisor.

This initiative to engage more alumni and students of color comes at a turning point for Roger Williams. RWU established its first Chief Diversity Officer in 2017, a senior leadership position, and staff to oversee diversity, equity and inclusion at the university; launched a university-wide [Equity Action Plan](#); and created a mentoring program and living learning communities aimed at supporting students of color. The university was also [recognized for our commitment to equity work](#), receiving the Providence Business News Diversity and Inclusion Award.

But there is still much work to be done to cultivate the inclusive and equitable institution RWU aspires to be. The path ahead will require implementing pathways and resources to foster equitable success for minoritized student groups; providing training on the role implicit bias and microaggressions play in causing inequity and a feeling of “otherness”; and expanding the multicultural lens on academic and extra-curricular programs so that all students feel represented in what they’re learning and experiencing as RWU’s culture.

The AOCN's first events will provide an opportunity to open a dialogue with alumni of color, current students of color, and faculty and staff to identify challenges and help shape a stronger culture of equity at the university. On Oct. 26, the AOCN will hold an "Alumni of Color Network Conversation with Students," and on Dec. 2, the group will hold an "Alumni of Color Network Conversation"; both virtual events will be held from 6:00 to 7:00 pm. For more information, contact the Office of Alumni Relations at alumni@rwu.edu or 401-254-3735.

"We need to do this kind of work," Borkai said. "As an alum, you have to create a pathway for the people after you. It's important for us to prepare future generations for success."

Get Involved with the AOCN

Alumni of color interested in joining this effort can contact aocn@g.rwu.edu